9 Common OH&S Errors

The challenge of managing the aspects of occupational health and safety (OH&S) in the workplace can often feel overwhelming. There are many legal, moral and financial reasons for us to pay attention to OH&S obligations.

In terms of successfully managing OH&S issues, the following list includes some of the common errors and pitfalls that we must avoid.

"It is during our darkest moments that we must focus to see the light."

~Aristotle Onasis

1. Celebrating the lack of injuries and not the existence of safety. It's a huge mistake to focus on the lack of injuries as the measure of safety performance. There are many people who can tell of an unnoticed situation when they've taken a terrible chance on the job-even though their wellbeing was at stake. Of course, companies must be happy when nobody gets hurt over an extended period of time, but it doesn't mean that you're "safe." And safety can't be defined as a lack of accidents. Safety is created by what we do, not what we avoid.

2. Doing safety to our employees and not with them. Rules imposed by others usually don't get needed "buy-in" to actually change behavior. It makes more sense to involve employees in the process of establishing safe behaviors and rules that apply in the workplace. This will lead to increased compliance. Challenging groups of employees to set and review standards of performance involves them in the essentials of safety.

3. Doing safety for the government. In the early stages of developing a safety culture, companies can make the mistake of being "reluctant compliers." They're doing safety because the government is forcing them to do it. The value of managing safety is beneficial to a company's bottom line productivity and performance. True performance is all about doing safety to achieve added value. Safety is also about getting everyone home safely every night! It's important to remain in compliance with the applicable OH&S related laws, but don't do safety for the government, let's make our work safe and make it legal. The company will thrive financially because of it.

4. Ignoring the importance of the proper tools, equipment, materials and workspace. Unsafe behaviors are involved in all of the incidents that companies experience. The other part of the formula is that unsafe conditions are also present. We need to focus efforts on both safe behaviors and safe conditions (i.e. tools, equipment, materials and work environment). If we only supply broken tools to people, we must not be surprised when they get hurt. Good tools and equipment increase the chances that workers will do their work and not take unnecessary risks.

5. Ignoring the culture of unsafe behavior. Not making safe behavior personal and not holding everyone accountable for making it safe at work is a huge mistake. Allowing employees to continue unsafe behavior is often disastrous. Not unlike playing team sports, it's crucial to take the opportunity and coach our fellow employees who aren't working safely. Again, we want all workers to go home safely at he end of a shift.

6. Miscalculating the power of groups actively caring about each other. Inviting co-workers to provide feedback and coaching when they see an unsafe act encourages the team approach to safety. Unless invited, our co-workers may feel reluctant to bring mistakes to the attention of management for fear of a poor reaction. We're in this together, so why not open up the discussion and invite everyone to overcome the challenges and work more safely.

7. Delivering safety programs to passive employees. The sooner that all workers are held accountable for safe production and not just production with safety added on, the better off we'll be. Challenging employees to come up with ways to work more safely is a well-documented, sure-fire way to increase safety performance.

8. Measuring results and not the activities that create safety.   Companies that define safety activities for all staff, including the CEO, are safer organizations. Demand that the measurement of safety involves tasks, such as investigations, hazard assessments, inspections and attending meetings. This is what gets things done. Not applying these measures, however, ensures that safety activities will take a back seat to production every time.

9. Managing OH&S differently than we manage other business parts. Why would profitable and successful companies with a clear record of managing success implement a safety program that doesn't exactly replicate why they're successful in the first place? Manage safety exactly like the business itself to achieve similar results. There are too many organizations that manage safety differently than the business to the peril of their safety results. Workers and the management team are motivated to drive production results. So, why would you settle for anything less when it involves safety? Far too often, companies are very positive and proactive when it comes to production activity. At the same time, however, they do the opposite by providing only negative safety reinforcement. As a condition of employment, safety is commonly used as a threat. This is true, but so is being on time and doing your job. In employee orientation sessions, it's a mistake to make negative consequences the key message. Obviously, you can't ignore unsafe behaviors, but stop making safety feel like a negative thing. There's nothing negative about doing work with a focus on safe production.

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